

\auto\grant.2
Monday, 27 June 1988

For the past eighteen months, on a research and writing fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation and a six-month grant administered through the Center for Psychological Studies in the Nuclear Age at Harvard, I have been studying decision processes leading to moral, political or societal disasters.

This focus reflects my thirty-year professional and personal preoccupation with understanding and reducing the risk of the ultimate disaster, general nuclear war. For the last twenty years, that has included a concern to avert another Vietnam, and to avert the first-use nuclear threats that might again be associated with such a war (and which could link it to two-sided, general nuclear war). These last concerns, too, call for efforts to understand as well as to resist. For reasons some of which will be discussed below, I put the current probability of each of these disastrous contingencies much higher than do most other scholarly analysts.

I have myself participated in several of the disasters I have lately been studying. These included the nuclear war planning process and the Cuban Missile Crisis--both of which presented aspects of moral catastrophe even though no war resulted--and, at various levels, the Vietnam War. (I participated in the secret planning of escalation in Vietnam in 1964-65 at the highest civil service "supergrade," GS-18, in the Defense Department; later, despite holding the corresponding rank in the State Department, I participated (illegally as a civilian, from the point of view of the Geneva Code) in numerous combat operations including a frontal assault on a Vietcong machine-gun positions in Vietnam; still later, I was at one point the sole governmental researcher with full access to a 43-volume top secret history of the war, which became known as the Pentagon Papers when I revealed it to the Senate and the press).

Daniel Ellsberg
July 1, 1988

Report on Recent Research and Prospectus for a Political Memoir

In 1961 I was given the job of drafting, essentially to my own specifications, the Kennedy Administration's top secret guidelines to the Joint Chiefs of Staff for their operational plans for general nuclear war.

Ten years later, in 1971, I was on trial, facing a possible 115 years in prison, for releasing to the Senate and the press 7000 pages of top secret documents that were highly embarrassing to the

historical record of five presidents, four of whom I had served as a high-level consultant or official.

Obviously, something had changed, above all in my attitude toward the office of the President, including my willingness to keep its secrets. Not in my loyalty to the country; that was not challenged even by my prosecutor, and a psychological profile prepared on me (secretly and illegally) by the CIA concluded that I had acted "out of a higher sense of patriotism."

Yet at the beginning of the Sixties, I could scarcely have imagined a way of expressing patriotism that was higher than acting loyally to carry out the President's wishes, including his wish for secrecy. The very reason I had access to the "sensitive" documents I later revealed was that I had earned, and deserved, a reputation for extreme discretion and loyalty to my civilian bosses, tested qualities that had led to my being trusted with an extraordinary variety of closely-held secrets.

For example: I had been given the task of drafting new policy guidance to the war plans in part because, from earlier work on Presidential command and control, I knew more about current nuclear war plans than any other civilian in the country. In their first month in office--as soon as they had clearances and a "need to know," not before--I had taken it on myself to inform new officials like Paul Nitze, Assistant Secretary of Defense, and McGeorge Bundy, President Kennedy's Assistant for National Security Affairs, of serious problems with the existing plans.

In 1964, in order to study, with high-level interagency access, past nuclear crises--in two of which, Berlin and the Cuban Missile Crisis, I had participated--I was given special clearances higher than Top Secret. Later in the year, having become Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense, I had a dozen of these.

I witnessed intimately the Vietnam War from several levels. As Special Assistant I participated in the secret planning of escalation in 1964-65. My rank at this point was the highest civil service "supergrade," GS-18--equivalent to lieutenant general--and my access to written information was essentially the same as that of my boss, the Assistant Secretary. In 1965-67 in Vietnam, despite holding the equivalent State Department rank of FSR-1, I took part among other things in numerous combat operations, while evaluating the process of pacification in most of South Vietnam. Still later, as a consultant to the Defense Department, I was at one point, in 1969, the sole researcher on government contract with full access to the 43-volume top secret history of the war which became known as the Pentagon Papers when I revealed it to the press.

The people who entrusted me with these secrets were not

foolish to do so. But it was precisely what I came to learn in this dozen years working for the government that finally made me aware that obedience to the orders of my civilian superiors in the Executive Branch to conceal various facts, intentions and attitudes from the Congress, courts and public was--despite my earlier promises--an inadequate fulfillment of my obligations as a citizen and as a human being.

It seems time now to set down for the public what it was I learned that changed my mind. And changed my audience for research, and my career, my very sense of political identity: from being an insider, an advisor to the "President's men," to public activity that led both to my two-year prosecution for revealing the Pentagon Papers and to several dozen subsequent arrests for nonviolent civil resistance.

Despite this activism I remain in my own mind, and in the greater part of my time, primarily a researcher. And to a striking degree, my research agenda, like the focus of my political concerns, remains what it became twenty years ago and more, when I was still working for the government.

My goals remain both to understand and to reduce the probabilities of certain contingencies: above all, general nuclear war; more Vietnams; and nuclear first-use threats, which underly the arms race and could link a Vietnam to an escalating nuclear exchange. As the last point suggests, I believe these contingencies are closely related.

I believe, in contrast to many other specialists, that the risk of nuclear war is significantly high and rising. In part I see that as a product of current developments in the overall arms race, our continued policies of intervention in the Third World, and continued readiness of U.S. Presidents to threaten and prepare to initiate tactical nuclear warfare in support of U.S. or allied combat forces in a foreign intervention: emulating actual first-use threats or preparations made by seven of our eight postwar presidents, as I have shown elsewhere.¹

These factors combine, in my view, to raise the likelihood that an American President--or in a future, not-too-distant era, some other nuclear-armed leader--may someday deliberately choose, in what he perceives as a desperate situation, to initiate tactical nuclear war in an ongoing conflict, probably in the Third World. It is from that point on that current developments in nuclear weapons programs (not yet reversed by new steps toward detente and arms control) make further deliberate escalation and loss of control more likely than before.

¹ See "A Call to Mutiny" and MacArthur proposal, attached.

I have developed much of the evidence and argument for these propositions over the last seven or eight years. Additional work over the last eighteen months, including a major investigation of the Cuban Missile Crisis, is still to be written up, as is an overall presentation of the analysis. I propose to accomplish that over the next six to twelve months.

However, discussion of my thesis with other specialists over these years has shown that the most problematic issue is whether past and perhaps future nuclear first-use threats by American officials should be seen as pure bluffs, as these specialists tend to assume. (It might be added that in most cases they were unaware that many of these threats or serious preparations had been made, until I exposed the pattern.)

They have a confidence I lack: that in the world of "nuclear plenty" of the last twenty years and the indefinite future, no American President would conceivably "push the nuclear button" under any circumstances they can imagine, no matter what threats he might have made.

Their reasoning is simple and obvious, referring both to morality and prudence. To initiate nuclear warfare, even on the most "limited" scale, would kill too many people. And it would raise too great a risk of catastrophic retaliation, perhaps by a nuclear-armed ally of the adversary. No leader of the sort that Americans elect would ever do it. Nor, for that matter, would a Soviet General Secretary.

Plausible. One would like--even desperately--to believe it. Much hangs on this judgment. Is it true?

I use the word "specialist" for these analysts of nuclear war, and myself, rather than "expert," since there is a great shortage of empirical data; on these matters opinions must be speculative. Fortunately, there has been no actual experience of two-sided nuclear war, nor even one-sided attacks since Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

By the same token, one cannot refer to experience to discover the circumstances under which a nuclear first-use threat might be carried out, nor even to prove that such circumstances exist. Again fortunately, none of the numerous threats that American presidents (and in some instances, Soviet leaders) have conveyed has been carried out. I infer various reasons for this, but I cannot disprove the argument that, whatever the circumstances, presidents were never really close to doing so and never will be.

However, other evidence can be brought to bear. The exact circumstances and context of the actual past threats can be examined. (This I have done, to be reported in the coming research.) And there is no shortage of examples of slaughters and

misadventures in American historical records, and others', that are catastrophic by any standards other than that of nuclear war.

What is generally lacking is evidence bearing on the exact contribution of top American officials to these practical or moral failures (evidence of the sort brought to bear on Nazi officials in the Nuremberg Trials). Here my own personal observations as an insider are relevant; certainly, they have been critical to shaping my own judgments and the questions I have been addressing.

My research on these issues in the last eighteen months, funded by the MacArthur Foundation and individual donors to the Harvard Center for Psychological Studies in the Nuclear Era, has concentrated on just these issues, or in general on what I described, in my research proposal (attached), as "the moral and psychological universe of high-level national security managers, as this bears on the risks of nuclear war arising out of threats and commitments."

During this period, my research has come to focus on three challenging questions, often interrelated. How are we to understand, what circumstances evoke, what follows from:

(1) The secret readiness of men in power to use massacre as an instrument of policy: readiness to slaughter noncombatants, or threaten it, whether by conventional bombing, nuclear weapons, or (in the case of U.S. policy, usually through proxies) by death-squads or programs of genocide/politicide?

(2) The secret readiness of men in power to gamble with catastrophe: readiness to undertake courses of action predicted by advisors to have a high and disproportionate risk of moral and political disaster?

(3) The secret readiness of subordinates to carry out policies they perceive as disastrous and perhaps immoral, in some cases long after any hope of justification has been overwhelmed by evidence of failure and wrong-doing?

I can sympathize with Americans who find painful (or outrageous) the very thought of approaching data on American policymaking with such hypotheses. The information and experience inside the U.S. government that led me to these questions was painful for me, even anguishing, and still is.

What might surprise many is that this process started for me--and these very concerns began to preoccupy me--very early in the Sixties, while I was still "deep in the belly of the whale" as a consultant and official: long before I left the government and even before I worked on Vietnam. Time and again as I worked on nuclear matters, and later on Vietnam, revelations available only

to an insider forced me, recurrently in shock and bafflement, to approach these very questions.

If the questions betoken distrust of men in power, I can say in the words of a recent television commercial that I came by that distrust "the old-fashioned way: I earned it" by working for such men, perhaps too long too trustingly. But that story has yet to be told, and the time has come to begin to tell it.

What answers I have to report at this point are tentative and fragmentary. What I would equally like to convey is the importance of the questions I have been pursuing for so long, so that more analysts, and in a sense our society as a whole, will begin to address them.

I have concluded that the best way I can persuade others to share my sense of priorities and urgency regarding research--along with policy and political action--is by a kind of political memoir that will describe the experiences and pieces of information that gradually changed and shaped my own awareness.

Thus, along with writing up related research I have pursued over the last eighteen months, beginning this memoir will be my main work in the next six months and more. I would welcome financial support for it.

Perhaps I can best convey the import of this work by first describing, briefly, some incidents in the course of the Sixties--matters I have not written of before--that challenged my vocation of helping and advising men in power, in secret.

The price of sharing the secret data available to high-level officials in the national security apparatus and enjoying the chance to influence their views was, quite explicitly, a commitment to keep their secrets and to help them carry out policies with which I might sometimes disagree. At the beginning of the decade I had no doubt that this bargain was well worthwhile, that furthering and protecting the efforts of the President and his top advisors was the best way I could possibly serve my country.

The episodes below, providing me unusual, esoteric evidence of calculations that informed some of their decision-making, were disturbing indications that this might not be true. They gave glimpses of differences between us, in notions of what was permissible and what risks were worth taking, that suggested that some of the men I was serving and I were not, fundamentally, on the same team, after all; and that from the point of view of human survival, they might be part of the problem.

ITEM: While I was in the process of proposing new guidance for the nuclear war plans in 1961, I drafted a number of questions on the existing plans to be sent to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

From what I knew of the nuclear war planning process, which at that time was probably more than any other civilian, I believed that an honest answer to any one of these questions would be acutely embarrassing to the Chiefs and their Joint Staff. The point of asking the questions, most of which were sent to the JCS by the Deputy Secretary of Defense, was to put the architects of the current planning on the defensive, to weaken bureaucratic resistance to the radical changes in war planning I was proposing.

One of these questions was picked up by the White House and sent to the JCS in the name of President Kennedy. The question was:

"If your current plans for general nuclear war were carried out as planned, how many people would be killed in the Soviet Union and China?"

To my considerable surprise, this particular question (unlike the others) got a prompt and apparently realistic reply. That was not what I had anticipated, in suggesting it. On the contrary, I expected to force the JCS to admit--if only by asking for more time to reply, or else after coming up with a hastily-contrived figure that could be shown to be absurdly low--that they had never carefully considered this question, that they simply did not know the real answer.

I had reason to suppose this was the case--that no such estimate existed--but I turned out to be mistaken. A response arrived at the White House almost immediately. It was on a single sheet of paper, stamped top secret and, more significantly, addressed "for the eyes only" of the President. But since I had drafted the question the answer was shown to me.

Thus I held in my mind, one day in the spring of 1961, a piece of paper showing one of the most tightly-held secrets in the government: the number of people American military leaders planned to kill in the Soviet Union and China if their operational plans for war with the Soviet Union were implemented.

The answer was in the form of a graph, a rising line that related fatalities on the vertical axis, in millions of deaths, against time on the horizontal axis, in months from the time of attack. The line rose over time not because of repeated attacks--virtually all of the U.S. attacks would be in the first 24 hours, when the greater part of the fatalities would occur--but because it took time for the clouds of radioactive fallout to drift and

settle, and for many of the victims of lethal burns and radiation to die. The high point of the line, on the right of the graph, showed the number of people who would die from our attacks within six months after the execution of the plans.

The number was 325 million dead.

That was for the Soviet Union and China alone, which was what I had asked. (It was a peculiar feature of late Eisenhower-era war planning, which reflected outdated notions of a monolithic "Sino-Soviet Bloc," that in the event of war with the Soviet Union, no matter how it arose or where, US forces would at the outset attack every major city in China, as well as every major city in the Soviet Union).

Subsequent questions brought equally prompt calculations of fatalities elsewhere. Another hundred million or so would die in the Eastern European countries of the Warsaw Pact--the "captive nations"--from U.S. attacks on air defenses and military installations.

Fallout from our surface explosions on the Soviet Union, China and the satellites would decimate the populations of neutral nations bordering these countries--e.g., Finland, Sweden, Austria and Afghanistan--as well as Japan and Pakistan. These fatalities from U.S. attacks, up to a hundred million depending on wind conditions (and measures, if any, of warning and fallout protection), would occur without a single U.S. warhead landing on the territory of these countries outside the NATO and Warsaw Pacts.

Finns, for example, given prevailing wind conditions, would be virtually exterminated by the fallout from high-yield ground bursts on Soviet submarine pens in the vicinity of Leningrad.

Among the population of our NATO allies in Western Europe, fatalities from fallout from U.S. attacks on Warsaw Pact targets would depend very much on wind conditions, which would vary with the season. As General Gavin, testifying before Congress in the Fifties, had revealed, these allied fatalities from our own attacks could be up to a hundred million deaths "depending on which way the wind blows."

The total death-count from planned U.S. attacks--before allowing for any Soviet retaliation--was in the neighborhood of 600 million dead.

ITEM: On the night of President Kennedy's television announcement of the existence of Soviet missiles in Cuba, Monday, October 22, 1962, my friend Harry Rowen, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense

for Plans and Policy, International Security Affairs, asked me to come to Washington to help out. I took the next plane from Los Angeles and spent several days of that week sleeping on a sofa in the Pentagon.

I worked on two of the three Working Groups that reported that week to the Executive Committee of the NSC (Excom), an ad hoc group that sat with the President and managed the Cuban Missile Crisis. One of these, chaired by Walt Rostow in the State Department, did "long range planning," looking two weeks ahead. The other, under Rowen in Defense, made plans for an air strike against the air defenses and missiles and an invasion of Cuba, scheduled tentatively for Monday or Tuesday, October 29 or 30.

On Saturday night, the 27th, when Robert Kennedy delivered the President's ultimatum to Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin--to remove the missiles immediately or they would be struck--he set (he later told me) a 48-hour deadline. He also warned that U.S. Reconnaissance flights over Cuba would continue, and that if one more plane was shot down--as had happened Saturday morning--the U.S. would launch air strikes immediately. He rejected the Soviet proposal for ending the crisis, a public trade of the Soviet missiles in Cuba for removal of the comparable U.S. missiles in Turkey.

President Kennedy was convinced that if he had to carry out this ultimatum, the Soviets would almost surely retaliate by attacking our missiles in Turkey. On Saturday afternoon, October 27, Rowen was asked by Secretary McNamara, for the Excom, to lay out alternative options for a U.S. response to a Soviet (non-nuclear) attack on the U.S. missiles in Turkey, assigned to NATO. Harry called me in to work on this, and the two of us sat at opposite sides of his desk, writing as fast as we could.

The first option we presented was "No further U.S. response": in effect calling it "even," missiles destroyed in Turkey for missiles destroyed in Cuba, seeking to end hostilities there. We took some pride, I recall, in beginning with that, since we felt that few advisors in that era would have had the nerve to include that as a policy option.

Other choices included non-nuclear reprisal on the Soviet base from which their attack had been launched, or on several bases, with or without hitting Soviet air defense bases...

All this is context to the observation that throughout that week, even during this tense afternoon, Rowen and I continued to believe that the chance of nuclear war erupting from this confrontation was extremely low; and we presumed that was the attitude of the President and his lieutenants on the Excom.

We knew, of course, that a large part of the public, not only in the U.S. but throughout the world, thought otherwise. But the

basic reason for our own confidence was our awareness of the overwhelming strategic nuclear superiority of the United States. And that, we knew, was not nearly so clear to the public.

After all, Kennedy had run for election in 1960 largely on the issue of a supposed "missile gap" favoring the Soviets, and when he had discovered in office, in the fall of 1961, that the real missile (and bomber) gap was grossly in favor of the U.S. he did not make a dramatic effort to disabuse the public of just how wrong he had been. As a result, the public did not realize--indeed, the reality was still highly classified--how very little the Soviets actually had in the way of nuclear forces threatening the U.S.

In the fall of 1962 the U.S. had hundreds of intercontinental, intermediate-range and sub-launched warheads within range of the Soviet Union, and 3000 bombers within range. Within range of the U.S. (aside from the highly vulnerable missiles on Cuba, not yet operational) the Soviets had about 70 ICBMs under construction, of which only 10 were operational, and about 190 intercontinental bombers.

Facing that near-monopoly of U.S. strategic nuclear power against the Soviet Union, it was nearly inconceivable to us that Khrushchev would initiate nuclear operations under virtually any circumstances.

I backed the blockade, and the threat of an air strike, which seemed likely to me to cause the Soviets to withdraw. Indeed, I didn't think an air strike in Cuba would be necessary to get rid of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Nor was it necessary to trade away our missiles in Turkey, which, like the majority of the Excom, I strongly opposed for reasons of NATO solidarity.

None of these judgments looks very reliable to me in 1988; not that they seem clearly wrong, but my confidence in them (pre-Vietnam) was surely excessive. I was thirty-one years old in 1962, and I had not yet been in a war. Just a few years later--after personal wartime experience in Washington and Vietnam--I came to realize how much higher the risks had been than I had believed at the time, especially if we had launched an attack against Soviet forces in Cuba. (What I came to learn--what made the risks of escalation look higher in retrospect--was precisely the focus of this research: the startlinig propensity of men in power on both sides to risk catastrophe and to slaughter non-combatants in escalating violence rather than to accept a humiliating failure.)

The point here is that if I had believed otherwise in 1962, if I had thought the risks were high, I would have had a very different attitude about the relative merits of a threat strategy versus trading the Turkish missiles. And I would have strongly opposed any notion of attacking in Cuba, as well as a number of

provocative actions which were already going on. And I believe the same was true for Rowen.

Moreover, if an air strike did take place and if the Soviets did, against all odds, recklessly confront us in Europe or at sea, one thing was unequivocally clear to us: the U.S. should not initiate nuclear war, no matter what first-use threats it might have made, under any circumstances whatever. Based on a conversation I had had with Secretary McNamara, I believed that he and the President shared this view (in contrast to their public, official statements); that was a key basis for my strong sense of personal loyalty to McNamara.

What this added up to was that the Soviets seemed to us likely to back down to U.S. firm non-nuclear threats, and even if they did not, there was almost no chance that either side would resort to nuclear weapons.

Thus our views in 1962--without defending them here--were at least consistent with our support of the fairly threatening posture and active "pressures" the Excom had chosen from the beginning. We assumed that the Excom members we were serving in a staff role thought much the same way. My notes reveal that sometime during that week, Harry Rowen remarked to me, "I think the Executive Committee puts the chance of nuclear war very low, though they still may overestimate it by ten times. They may put it at 1 in 100." He himself would have said the odds were 1 in 1000.

But the day after the crisis ended, on Monday, October 29, his boss Paul Nitze told him that he had put the chance of some form of nuclear war, if we had struck the missiles on Cuba, as "fairly high." And his estimate of the risk, he thought, was the lowest in the Excom; everyone else put it higher. Harry asked him what odds he would have given. Nitze's answer was:

"1 in 10."

I remember my reaction to this news. It was in two parts, both of which Harry seemed to share. First, puzzlement: why would they put the risk that high? How could they figure that either side was that ready to go to nuclear war? Could it be that Nitze, and the others, like the public, had not really absorbed the new intelligence on the strategic balance, or that they didn't fully believe it?

Second, slightly delayed: "One in ten????!! Of nuclear war?! ...And we were doing what we were doing?!"

(What the U.S. had been doing, by order of the Excom, included: the blockade itself, forcing Soviet submarines to surface, high-level and low-level reconnaissance flights over Cuba,

a large-scale airborne alert with significant risk of accidents involving nuclear weapons, continuing reconnaissance after several planes were fired on and one shot down on Saturday, full preparations--if they were wholly a bluff, they fooled us--for invasion and airstrike...to which could be added Robert Kennedy's official 48-hour ultimatum on Saturday night and the warning he delivered that if a second recon plane were shot down the airstrike would follow immediately...)

I believed that the stakes in this confrontation, in global psychological and political terms (not to speak of domestic politics) were quite high, by ordinary standards: as they had seemed to me the year earlier, in the Berlin crisis, of which this appeared to be in part a continuation. I was prepared to support threats, willing to take some risks of non-nuclear war, even to see the U.S. engage in it, as in Korea; I was, in short, a cold warrior working for the Defense Department.

But to be willing to take a 10% chance of nuclear war... in taking the actions described above, and refusing through Saturday night to make a public trade of the Turkish missiles...

Who were these people I was working for? Were the civilians no better than the military? Was the President insane?

I would not have felt better if I had known what Ted Sorenson revealed three years later about the President's own odds during the crisis that it would end in general nuclear war: "Somewhere between one out of three and even."

ITEM: In 1964 and 1965 when the U.S. public was polled repeatedly on three policy options on Vietnam--negotiate and get out, hold on and continue present efforts, carry the war to North Vietnam at risk of war with China--large pluralities supported the middle option in each case. So did I. In the period when I was working on escalation in the Pentagon, and then first went to Vietnam, my attitudes were in step with those of a plurality of the American people. (See John E. Mueller, War, Presidents and Public Opinion, N.Y. 1973, pp. 81-98).

That was likewise true from the late spring of 1968 till the end of the war, when I along with a plurality of the American public favored getting out. Within a few months of the Tet Offensive in February, 1968, the plurality had shifted for the first time to discontinuing the struggle, against the combined support for broadened operations or an all-out crash effort, and the gap widened from then on.

By October, 1969, when I was secretly copying the Pentagon

Papers and joined in a public letter to the New York Times calling for American troops to be withdrawn from Vietnam by the end of 1970, 56% of the public supported that proposal, which had been introduced in Congress by Senator Goodell. (Goodell, a Republican from New York who had been appointed to replace Robert Kennedy, could not get one Republican or Democratic co-sponsor for his bill, despite the opinion of the public).

It was in the spring of 1968 that the steadily rising curve of those who opposed the war, believing it was a mistake to have become involved, crossed the steadily declining curve of those who thought it had not been a mistake and supported the war, with the former a widening majority ever after. By the late spring of 1970--as I left RAND in expectation of imminent arrest for copying the Pentagon Papers, and campuses shut down in protest over the Cambodian invasion--those who believed our involvement was "immoral" became for the first time, and remained, a majority.

It was only in-between these periods, as I became increasingly pessimistic about our policy, that I was out of step with the attitudes of the public. This was particularly true in the fall of 1967, when 50% or more of the public favored stepping up our attacks, while only about a third agreed with me that we should get out, a course I was lobbying for at Defense, State and the White House from my return from Vietnam in July, 1967.

I was not, however, out of step with my colleagues in the Executive Branch. They knew my views. From the time of my return from Vietnam in July 1967, I was actively... Except for Walt Rostow in the White House, I found my views received with respect and general agreement everywhere I turned.

That fall over thirty analysts, nearly all military officers, began work on the McNamara Study that became known as the Pentagon Papers, "U.S. Decision-making in Vietnam, 1945-68." They had not been chosen for their policy views, least of all for opposition to our policy; but I did not know of one who was markedly less "dovish" or pessimistic than I was, or even in basic disagreement with me.

These officers, from Army, Navy and Air Force, had been selected largely for their analytical ability; but the uniformity of opinion--not representative of American opinion, at this particular time--reflected another criterion they shared, service in Vietnam. That was enough, for each of them to know that what their former commander, General Westmoreland, was telling Congress and the press that fall--was false.

The President had brought Westmoreland back from Vietnam to announce to a Joint Session of Congress and to the press that there was no stalemate in Vietnam, that we were winning, and that victory was in sight. The truth we knew was that what we had in Vietnam

was a stalemate, that we were not winning, and that victory for us was nowhere in sight and almost surely never would be. That is what these knowledgeable officers had learned in Vietnam, as I had; and they included Republicans who later held high-level positions in the extreme right wing of the Reagan Administration.

There is no polling data on attitudes within the government. But from 1967-70 I was in an unusually good position to have a sense of opinions throughout the upper levels of the national security apparatus. As a RAND analyst, untied to any particular bureaucratic base, I consulted "all over town," maintaining contacts from a decade of interagency consulting and service as an official in Defense and State. The unmistakable impression I formed was that the attitudes of the officers on the secret McNamara Study Group were already very widespread in the Pentagon, State and CIA by the end of 1967, even among those who had not served in Vietnam; and that they became virtually universal inside the government soon after the Tet Offensive in 1968.

What I am saying--and I have never seen this mentioned elsewhere, or even speculated about--is that opinions on the war and on policy options within the planning and policymaking circles of the national security apparatus in the spring of 1968, and thereafter, were not significantly different from those in the American public at large. More specifically, they were not at all more hawkish; probably the contrary.

That was my clear opinion then, and--lacking "scientific sampling"--I was in as good a position to judge as anyone. Moreover, given the nature of my work, I was as sensitive as anyone to indications that my views were out of line with those of my audiences--I was in demand as a briefer, to military and official listeners--or my sponsors, bosses, colleagues. As far as I could tell, I was not.

In short, I was in a good position to judge the validity of a comment made to me by Morton Halperin in the late spring of 1968. Halperin had replaced me as Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, now Paul Warnke. "You should realize," Halperin said, "there are just three people in this government who still believe in what we're doing. Johnson, Rusk and Rostow. That's it."

It took only a few moments to realize that that was not a rhetorical exaggeration. It really was hard, in fact impossible, to think of exceptions to that generalization. Probably Westmoreland in Saigon; not the Chiefs. Not anyone else we could think of, then or the rest of that year. And though Nixon and Kissinger (not Laird, not Rogers) continued--contrary to their public image--in the religion of Johnson and Rusk, Halperin's observation held for the general reaches of the national security system, for the remainder of the war.

But the war had seven years to go.

By the time McNamara left office in March, 1968, the U.S. had dropped in three years 1.5 million tons of bombs on Indochina, as much as it had dropped on Europe in World War II. In the remaining ten months of 1968 the Defense Department doubled that figure, dropping another 1.7 million tons, for a total under Johnson of 3.2 million tons: 50% more than the 2 million tons of bombs dropped in all theaters of World War II. This was done under Clark Clifford, who had lost all faith in the war, and Paul Warnke, who never had any, and who were otherwise bending every effort toward a negotiated end to it.

The Nixon Administration dropped another 4.5 million tons, two more World War II's. Henry Kissinger got a Nobel Peace Prize, having with his boss exploded more of Nobel's product on humans than any man in history.

Out of the 7.7 million tons of high explosives dropped on Indochina (in addition to approximately the same tonnage of artillery shells), four times as much--over six million tons--was dropped after the Tet Offensive as before it. The Tet Offensive had, in fact, crystallized the disillusionment with the war in the public, which was paying for the bombs, and in the government apparatus that was dropping them. But the bombs continued to get dropped. In March of 1968 the war had three more World War II's to go.

Outside the White House the officials had lost heart. But it was the President's wish--first Johnson's, then Nixon's--that the war continue, in pursuit of terms they never did achieve (and were never likely to, never even close). And the job got done: so far as I could tell, in Halperin's phrase, by people under them who did not believe in what they were doing.

There was something there, I have thought ever since, that needed to be understood.